CHAPTER NINE

COMMUNITY APPEARANCE AND DESIGN

GOAL: *Use accepted community design principles, environmental, public art, and property maintenance standards to foster a distinct identity for Rockville.*

POLICIES

1. Establish design standards for commercial areas of Rockville.
2. Develop design standards for public and government buildings.
3. Encourage all new and existing development to include art in areas accessible to the public or contribute to an art-related fund.

INTRODUCTION

A community is judged by its appearance. Community appearance and design involves all of the physical elements within the community. It includes the overall street layout, the specifics of roadway construction, street lighting, signs, pedestrian amenities, street trees and other landscaping. It also includes all aspects of residential, public and commercial building design – architectural style, massing, scale, height, and setting. Site design for commercial, industrial, and public buildings includes vehicle and pedestrian access to the site, parking, pedestrian amenities, bicycle amenities, signs, site services, public art, and landscaping.

Zoning regulations control minimum requirements such as building setbacks from the front, rear, and side property lines, maximum building height, and percentage of impervious surface coverage. However, zoning controls alone cannot adequately control the three-dimensional aspects of development, nor can they describe the appropriate relationship between structures. Generally, zoning regulations do not define architectural style for the building or a functional, attractive site design. While some of these issues are addressed during the normal review process, design guidelines or regulations are necessary to articulate in a comprehensive manner more specific intentions for building design and site elements for the community.

Typical Design Elements

The following is a brief discussion of typical design elements that are part of a community's physical appearance.

Streets

Streets are arranged either in a geometric grid pattern or in a curvilinear fashion and can either connect with a network of other streets or dead end in cul-de-sacs. In the past, the grid pattern tended to be utilized in flat, urban areas while curvilinear streets were designed to respond to a hilly topography. In the last fifty years, curvilinear streets ending in cul-de-sacs

were favored for most suburban roads regardless of the topography because cut-through traffic was reduced. Currently, the traditional grid pattern is returning to fashion because it results in a road network with more options that improves circulation (by car, bike or foot) and lessens the amount of vehicles at any one intersection. Street widths vary and help to define residential streets from larger public and commercial avenues. Widths are also regulated by the amount and speed of traffic on the roadway.

Gateways are the major entrances to a community and to a particular area of a city. For instance, a major arterial roadway to the City is Veirs Mill Road. As Veirs Mill Road approaches Route 355, it is also a gateway to the Town Center. Attractive gateways can indicate the transition from Montgomery County to the City, thereby, establishing Rockville as a distinct entity. Gateways can be accentuated in a variety of ways to provide a welcoming entrance into the city.

Streetscape

The term streetscape refers to everything that is associated with a road including the view as one travels along the road. It includes the type of paving material, curbs, traffic medians, and bike lanes alongside the road. It includes the presence or absence of street trees, tree species, and the maturity/height of the trees as well as other landscaping such as flowers in highway medians. Sidewalks are also considered part of the streetscape. Their width and location either encourage or discourage pedestrian movement. Wide sidewalks that are separated from the street by a tree-lined grass strip are more gracious and favorable to walking. Sidewalks directly along the roadway also offer the pedestrian with a place to walk, but depending upon the amount and speed of the vehicular traffic, may not provide as much physical or psychological protection.

Streetlights are also part of a streetscape and provide necessary lighting at night. However, strictly utilitarian "cobra" lights located on utility poles are vastly different visually from more decorative poles and fixtures although both may provide similar levels of light. Utility poles and wires along a roadway generally are considered to be the opposite of a visual amenity although they provide needed electricity and technology for communication devices. The goal of the City is to provide priority locations for relocating existing power lines underground.

Signs provide needed information to those not familiar with the area. Generally, street signs have a uniform size and color throughout the community. Road signs in Rockville have a

blue background while surrounding areas in the County have green signs. Larger signs placed at the entrances to city boundaries to identify the community provide both information and civic pride. Individual business signs are meant to identify the business and generally to be visible from the roadway. The design and size of these signs also affect the aesthetics of the community. Private signs are regulated by provisions in the Zoning Ordinance.

Buildings

Buildings are a major three-dimensional part of the community and are defined by architectural style, mass, scale, signage, use, and overall design/function of the site. Historically, different time periods favored a particular architecture style that could be influenced also by regional climate and cultural demands. Designs for civic, commercial, and industrial buildings are different than those for single-family homes. In general, historic architectural styles contain rich and varied building surface elements while some "modern" architectural styles (post 1950) may focus on simplicity in building form and surface treatments. Lately, "neo-traditional" architectural styles for both commercial and public buildings (as well as residential structures) are becoming more popular and incorporates more surface design elements to the exterior.

Mass and scale of buildings are closely related. Mass refers to how large a building is including its height and overall bulk. Scale refers to its proportional relationship with adjoining structures as well as how it the average person views the structure. For instance, the design of lower floors of a building have a strong influence on the perception of a building's scale and mass. A large, tall building located in an urban area may be perfectly in scale with its neighbors while it would be out of place along a street lined with shorter buildings. Large expanses of wall area can be minimized by adding architectural elements, windows, landscaping, and/or a more sympathetic building location on the site.

Site Design

Site design refers to how a building is located on the property. Zoning regulations control minimal setback requirements. These requirements were developed for residential and other areas in order to give streets a park-like setting by encouraging a treed, grass-covered lawn next to the street. In addition, certain setback restrictions were developed in order to discourage fire from spreading to neighboring structures.

Similarly, as the suburbs developed, commercial and industrial buildings were placed in large "parks." The intent was to provide a rural atmosphere for the streetscape. In addition, setting a building back from the street tended to diminish its size and bulk. Another design intent was to blend the building in with the "natural" landscape. This also meant that individual buildings were not necessarily set back from the street in a uniform fashion.

Other elements that are part of site design are the circulation pattern, parking lots, and landscaping. Circulation refers to how vehicles and pedestrians move from the street to the parking area and to the building. Ease of movement and safety are primary objectives of good design. Often parking lots are the largest part of a site. How the parking lot relates to the building it serves and the street is an important issue. In order to retain the naturalized "park" element, many designers favor siting parking lots to the rear of the main building and providing landscape buffering between the parking and adjoining properties. Retailers tend to favor

parking along the street or in lots located in front of their stores. The amount of landscaping to reduce the visibility of the parking is also a hotly debated issue, and landscaping has both environmental and design considerations.

Public Buildings

Traditionally, public buildings were designed as important facilities that were meant to inspire awe and civic pride. Government buildings that directly serve the public (city halls, libraries, schools, post offices) have been designed in countless architectural styles. The use of durable materials, ceremonial entrances, street orientation, public art, and other ornamentation reinforce the importance of public buildings. Often these buildings are easily identified along a street even without a specific sign. Pre-World War II public buildings in Rockville (Red Brick Courthouse, Grey Courthouse, and the Old Post Office) have a greater public presence than many post-World War II buildings.

Public Spaces

Basically, these are areas where people gather or use as they go about their daily lives outside the home. They include the streets and sidewalks around commercial areas as well as the larger plazas and parks within the community especially those related to public buildings. It is important that these areas be welcoming with well-designed amenities such as decorative and functional lighting, benches, and landscaping.

Art

Public art is utilized to enhance the community. A positive identity for the city can be created by utilizing various types of public art including sculpture, statues, murals, or fountains. Unique landscaping and environmental sculptures (shapes created out of materials such as plant material, earth and/or rocks) can also be considered art depending upon the contest and the site. Public art can become an attractive addition to most development projects as well as establishing an identity for an area.

CURRENT DESIGN-RELATED REGULATIONS AND PROGRAMS IN ROCKVILLE

Zoning Regulations and Property Maintenance Code

Rockville's Zoning Ordinance establishes allowed uses and general design requirements. It establishes different residential, commercial, mixed-use, and industrial zones. Each zone has specific area, setback, building height, and impervious service coverage requirements.

Residential zones are subject to the general zoning area, setback, height, and coverage requirements. In addition, there is a separate property maintenance code. This covers items associated with structural integrity and safety of the home and property. The lack of window screens, gutters, or siding material would be addressed under the Code. In addition, the grass must be cut so that it is less than ten inches, and there must be some type of groundcover on all unpaved surfaces. However, requiring leaves to be raked is not part of the code, and there is no requirement to paint the house (as long as the paint is not peeling).

Commercial areas are subject to other standards as well as the property maintenance code. There are design standards for parking areas, entrance/exit driveways, loading facilities, utilities, signs, and landscaping. There are also specific standards for the Town Center and the Rockville Pike.

Large Scale Retail

In 2000, the Mayor and Council amended the Zoning Ordinance to prohibit retail establishments larger than 65,000 square feet in total gross floor area in the Rockville Pike Commercial Zone (RPC) and the C-2 Zone. The text amendment also outlines design standards for retail establishments containing greater than 25,000 square feet of gross floor area and shopping centers of any size.

Sign Review Board

This three-member board is responsible for reviewing applications for new signs to ensure compliance with the City's Zoning Regulations. The sign regulations apply to permanent and temporary signs.

Historic District Commission (HDC)

The Historic District Commission regulates all exterior changes (with the exception of paint color) to buildings located within the historic districts. It also reviews the design of any new structure being constructed within the district. In 1977, the HDC adopted and published *Architectural Design Guidelines for the Exterior Rehabilitation of Buildings in Rockville's Historic Districts*. The HDC also published *Owning Property in the Rockville Historic District* in 1996. These documents outline guidelines for appropriate changes or additions to residential structures. The HDC reviews proposals to determine whether the new building or addition to an older building conform to the existing architecture, mass, and scale of adjacent structures and/or the original structure.

Street Tree Master Plan

Adopted in 2000 by the Mayor and Council, the *Street Tree Master Plan* states that the City of Rockville will have tree-lined streets. The plan provides for the planting and maintenance of a uniform streetscape on the City's streets. It provides a pre-approved list of trees listed by each individual street.

Development Review Committee

This group is comprised of City employees who are involved in the site plan review process. As a group, members review development applications and discuss issues relating to the proposed use and design in a comprehensive manner. For instance, discussion may involve how to save mature trees on the site and construct needed stormwater management facilities.

The City also has a design consultant who reviews buildings and sites that are being developed under the "Optional Method of Development" within the Town Center or Rockville Pike zones in addition to other projects as needed on a case-by-case basis.

Community Arts Program

The Rockville Cultural Arts Commission promotes the use of art in private developments, and it is the policy of the City to encourage the installation of public art and the use of artistic design in all facets of private and public development. The Community Arts program is directed by the Cultural Arts Commission and administered by the Arts Division staff, which is part of the Recreation and Parks Department. There are two documents that articulate the mission for the program. Neither has been adopted as part of the City's Master Plan. *The Master Plan for the Arts (1995-2001)* serves "…to establish guidelines and policies for arts concerns of the City [and] …to provide arts organizations and individuals with a resource tool to assist in implementing their own development and growth." The *Art in Public Places Master Plan* outlines the process by which the Art in Public Places program is administered. The objective is to provide art in both public spaces and private commercial developments (office and retail). A policy to encourage art in private developments is also under consideration.

Visual Preference Survey

In 1997, A Nelessen Associates, Inc. performed a visual analysis and presentation of the Metro area of the Town Center. The presentation resulted in a booklet entitled *Visual Preference Survey for the City of Rockville, Maryland*. The booklet outlines how a number of sites and the streetscape could be improved in the Town Center and elsewhere in the City. This technique provides a useful method to identify community preferences on design issues.

CRITICAL ISSUES

Design Standards for Non-Residential Structures

Most non-residential structures are reviewed for zoning compliance with some design suggestions from Planning staff, the Planning Commission or the Mayor and Council. However, the development of written and illustrated design guidelines can be used to provide a common vision for the appearance of non-residential areas in the City. A preferred source for new design guidelines is the historic architectural styles built in Rockville's past.

The retail buildings along Route 355 are in many cases typical strip malls with little aesthetic amenities or design appeal. As sites are developed or redeveloped along Rockville Pike, the design standards outlined in the Rockville Pike Master Plan are applied. However, these design standards should be reviewed in order to determine how well the standards have worked and if they are still desired. Some of the details that will be reviewed are the building setback/minimum "build to line" requirements, the mandatory use of arcades or colonnades on a building, general streetscape and planting standards, and building heights in the Metro Performance District.

In addition, similar design standards should be established for sites along Hungerford Drive and Frederick Road to develop a more uniform streetscape. The City of Gaithersburg has developed a Frederick Avenue Corridor Master Plan that outlines design considerations, and the Montgomery County Planning Board has established Route 355 as roadway for a change in character to a boulevard with attractive landscaping and other streetscape improvements.

Streetscape and Public Space Issues

Generally, Rockville has been successful in providing streetscape amenities along its roadways especially within the Town Center. The Parks Department maintains numerous planting beds in traffic islands to soften the effect of the pavement. The brick-like paving material on portions of Monroe Street, Maryland Avenue, and Montgomery Avenue provides a definition to the space and helps to slow traffic. The park, fountain, and ornamental lighting around the Old Brick Courthouse add to the ambiance of the Town Center. Veterans Memorial Park is a good example of a gateway park.

It is more difficult to provide streetscape amenities along State or County controlled roadways. However, these roadways are in need of improvements. The City has gained permission to plant and maintain various traffic islands. This practice should be continued. The City should also continue urging the State and County to install appropriate streetscape improvements as well as urging the utility companies to bury utility lines.

Design Standards for the Town Center

The separate Town Center Master Plan was developed to balance existing public uses (State, County, and City), economic needs, market conditions, a desired increase in residential use, and a comprehensive design vision for the Town Center. This document includes design guidelines for the Town Center Planning Area.

Design Standards for Public Buildings

Because public buildings play such a significant role in the community, it is important to develop standards that can be applied to their design. Different design standards would need to be developed for municipal buildings with a specific use or location. For instance, schools that are located in residential neighborhoods require a different design standard than a larger facility meant to serve the entire community such as a library or a courthouse. Because there have been concerns with the quality of the architecture for some of the governmental buildings within the City, it is important to articulate the design standards that the community supports.

In general, traditional architectural styles are favored for major administrative office buildings, court houses, and libraries although a modern architectural style would be acceptable if the building has appropriate architectural embellishments. It is important that there be architectural details at the street level such as at the entrances and around windows. Durable materials such as stone and brick are favored as building materials, and the wall surface should have varied surface texture and patterns at street level. The siting of public buildings is very important, and the buildings should be given a prominent location. The buildings should be oriented towards the pedestrian, and public gathering spaces should be incorporated into the site design. Other public buildings that are more utilitarian in nature (maintenance facilities) may need to be screened from adjoining properties. In addition, the appearance of all publicly owned properties, particularly those in or adjacent to residential neighborhoods, should be maintained as a compliment to the community.

Recommendations

1. Amend the Zoning Ordinance to establish design guidelines for MD 355 north of the Town Center to provide design consistency along the entire Route.
2. Review the Rockville Pike Corridor Master Plan's design recommendations for continued applicability and recommend changes to the Zoning Ordinance text as necessary.
3. Review the design recommendations as part of the Town Center Master Plan revision and amend the Zoning Ordinance text as necessary.
4. Incorporate the *Art in Public Places Master Plan* and the *Master Plan for the Arts* into the Master Plan and the development review process
5. Improve the streetscape with the use of well-designed amenities (street lights, benches, banners, trees, curbs, and gutters, etc.)
6. Implement the City's policy on burying underground utilities.
7. Develop design guidelines for public buildings.